



U.S. invests in another step toward manless peace-war

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The great American success story is not dead. Like Thomas Edison and Henry Ford, we still produce a few young men and women who conceive an idea, stick with and work with it to produce a new item that improves the entire world. And get rich in the process. Twins Geoff and Mike Howe of Berwick, Maine are a ripe 34-years-old. Their computer-directed armored tank goes into action carrying no men and very little armor. From one to five miles in the rear it's guided and fired by a computer-trained soldier. The possibilities may greatly change ground war. Or it may be the future's defense in gang war, border control or occupation. To see their low (54 inches high), fast-racing Ripsaw MS1 in action pops your eyes and puzzles your brain. During super-active lives, these men have tinkered in just about every kind of vehicle a man can tinker with, so that today Howe and Howe Technologies stand on the brink of huge success.

They started early. At 8 years, they built a log cabin a few hundred feet from their rural house. Cutting small trees with a hatchet, they stacked and nailed them to a frame and were well on the way to a 10-by-10 playhouse until an irate next door neighbor came to their father: "Your boys are cutting down every small tree on my land." The recriminations of their dad did not end the project. Where would they get more logs? Idea! Why not go down instead of up? With shovels they dug six feet beneath the four feet already standing, mixed and laid a concrete floor and finished the clubhouse to sleep in and talk about more projects.

Only the beginning

By 12, they had become fascinated with robots or the fancier classification "robotics" and were tinkering toward many inventions. By the time they reached their late teens, they spent summers working on New England fishing boats to finance college. Somewhere in these years they graduated — in 1996 — Geoff from the University of Maine, Mike from Bowdoin, AND organized a rock band (their father was a musician), playing "gigs" all around. But they needed a bus to travel in and a stage to play from. Usually they performed outdoors. Seven hundred and fifty dollars fishing money paid for a 30-year-old school bus, which they later called "The Frankenstein" because they altered it so often. One change: slicing open the right side wall from the top and hydraulic-hinging the bottom to fold out and double the inside floor. For three years of performances, this offered hundreds of teenagers hot rock concerts and dances.

Diplomas in hand, Mike joined the local police force, and Geoff did house construction. Somehow, they found time to court and marry two sisters, Tammey and Tracey Shogen from Elliott, Maine. Eventually Geoff studied for his license and joined the Portsmouth water treatment force. Mike became a stock salesman.

The fastest track tank

But the tinkering bug stayed in them. In off-work time, they built road-racing vehicles, then a swamp buggy. In 2001, they came to the decision to build the fastest duel-tracked vehicle in the world! It could be a military tank or serve civilian protection needs. But money! They needed lots. Geoff still praises his wife for agreeing to mortgage their home for \$250,000 to provide the cash. Their vehicle attracted wide interest from the beginning, so much so that in 2005 they

decided to enter the Ripsaw in the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency's annual competition. They won a ranking of 38th out of 178 entries.

This was self-directed vehicle in which the Services showed great interest. They went all the way to the semi-finals until the \$40,000 needed for expenses forced them to drop out. But their tank proved very interesting to several other national automobile organizations. By 2006 they had an invitation to Washington to display their ware for the Army Research, Development and Engineering Center. Within a year, Maine senators helped the Howes get grant funds to build a prototype of the Ripsaw for the government.

Today, in partnership with ARDEC, they have attained their goal, and are designing finishing touches on the future Ripsaw MS2, the world's fastest dual-tracked vehicle. At 6,500 pounds (far lighter than the old, heavily armored tanks), it whizzes across the terrain at 60-plus mph, accelerating from zero to 50 mph in five seconds. Deep water, thick mud and heavy sand are no obstacle. It cuts right through them, then climbs up rocky, 45-degree slopes.

What is it costing, millions?

For the first one, only \$550,000, a pittance compared to other military equipment. The M2 will cost very little more. Their government contract for all the research and development will be less than \$3 million, by far one of the least expensive new military machines. Still young, Mike and Geoff are in the middle of it all. "You can do it. Anybody can do it," they say. "Just believe in yourself and never stop trying."

Retired editor and public relations executive Thomas Langford's column is titled "Some Edisto stories." Let him know if you have stories to share: 803-534-2097.